

Alienation and the Transience of Life: An Existential Psychological Reading of Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro"

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Abstract

Ezra Pound, one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century, is regarded as the pioneer of the Imagist movement in the early modern era. His poem In a Station of the Metro stands among the earliest Imagist works, reflecting the psychological and emotional dimensions of urban life. The poem portrays the complexities of modern existence, the absurd nature of human behavior, and the alienation, isolation, and fleeting nature of human relationships in a rapidly urbanizing world. This study explores how Pound's poetry represents the modern human struggle with meaninglessness and examines the psychological effects of alienation and transience reflected in the poem. The research is grounded in Yalom's (1980) theory of existential concerns—death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. It interprets how these existential dimensions shape the modern individual's consciousness and emotional state, influencing their overall psyche and leading to existential anxiety. Employing a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2014), this study captures the complexity and nuance of the phenomenon under investigation. The research analyzes the poem's psychological and symbolic layers to uncover the poet's portrayal of urban loneliness, existential anxiety, and internal disconnection in a technologically advanced world. Ultimately, this study offers a psychological reading of In a Station of the Metro, illustrating Pound's artistic vision of human isolation and the search for meaning within the fragmented reality of modern existence.

Keywords: Imagism, urbanization, alienation, transience, existential anxiety, social anxiety, four existential concerns

I. Introduction

Ezra Pound is one of the most dominant and significant poets of the twentieth century and is recognized as the pioneer of the Imagist movement in the early modern age. He is widely acknowledged as the poet most responsible for defining and promoting a modernist aesthetic in poetry. During the early years of the twentieth century, Pound initiated a seminal exchange of work and ideas between British and American writers and became renowned for his generosity in supporting the work of major contemporaries such as W. B. Yeats, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, H. D., James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and particularly T. S. Eliot.

Pound's major contributions to poetry began with his declaration of Imagism—a movement derived from classical Chinese and Japanese poetics that emphasized clarity, precision, and economy of language while rejecting traditional rhyme and meter. His later work focused on the encyclopedic epic *The Cantos*, a project that spanned nearly fifty years. In 1913, Pound composed his renowned Imagist poem *In a Station of the Metro*, which gave rise to a transformative movement in modern literature. The central ideas of his poetry often revolve around the conditions of modern life, social change, cultural transformation, and the absurd nature of human behavior.

In *In a Station of the Metro*, Pound depicts the rapid urbanization of the twentieth century, which brought profound changes to human behavior and interaction. The poem encapsulates the essence of urban existence, emphasizing themes of alienation and transience that define modern city life. Alienation refers to feelings of disconnection and isolation from others, often resulting from the pressures and burdens of modern existence (Saleem, 2014).

Within the urban environment, alienation often manifests as anonymity, where individuals experience emotional detachment from their surroundings and communities. Transience—the fleeting and impermanent nature of experience—further amplifies this disconnection, producing psychological effects such as loneliness, emptiness, and existential anxiety.

Irvin D. Yalom (born 1931) is an American psychiatrist, psychotherapist, and author best known for developing existential psychotherapy—an approach centered on human freedom, meaning, and mortality.

Existential psychology is a branch of psychology that emphasizes the core aspects of human experience, including freedom, responsibility, death, and the search for meaning in life (Schneider, Pierson, & Bugental, 2015).

Existential anxiety arises when an individual becomes aware of life's ultimate realities, such as death, freedom, isolation, and the search for purpose (van Deurzen & Kenward, 2005).

This study adopts Yalom's (1980) existential framework—his Four Ultimate Concerns of Death, Freedom, Isolation, and Meaninglessness—as a theoretical lens for analyzing Pound's poem *In a Station of the Metro*. According to Yalom, these concerns represent the unavoidable realities of human existence that shape cognition, emotion, and behavior. Unlike psychoanalytic theories that emphasize unconscious drives, Yalom's approach centers on the conscious confrontation with existence itself, offering a more experiential and humanistic understanding of behavior.

- **Death – Awareness of Mortality:** Awareness of mortality evokes anxiety but also motivates individuals to live more authentically.
- **Freedom – Responsibility of Choice:** Freedom implies personal responsibility for one's decisions, which can be both liberating and anxiety-provoking.
- **Isolation – The Unbridgeable Gap:** Every human being ultimately faces life and death alone; however, awareness of this truth can deepen appreciation for genuine connection.
- **Meaninglessness – The Search for Purpose:** In a world without inherent meaning, individuals must construct their own purpose and values.

By analyzing Pound's poem through Yalom's framework, this research provides a deeper understanding of urban human experience. It explores the psychological effects of disconnection, loneliness, and existential anxiety, highlighting the internal chaos and emotional emptiness that accompany modern urban existence.

Research Questions

1. How does Ezra Pound's poetry represent the modern human struggle with meaninglessness?
2. How do alienation and transience in the poem reflect the psychological state of modern individuals living in an urban environment?
3. What factors contribute to social and existential anxiety in modern life?

Research Objectives

1. To analyze Ezra Pound's poetry to explore the modern human struggle with meaninglessness.
2. To examine how alienation and transience in the poem reflect the psychological state of modern individuals in an urban environment.
3. To identify and interpret the factors contributing to social and existential anxiety as depicted in modern life through Pound's poetic vision.

II. Research Problem

In the contemporary modern world, individuals increasingly experience disconnection, loneliness, social anxiety, and a sense of meaninglessness within the fast-paced rhythm of life. Modernist poetry frequently mirrors these psychological struggles. Pound's *In a Station of the Metro* captures the fleeting nature of life in an urban setting, where the throng of faces in a busy metro station mirrors the transience and isolation of human existence. The poem's brevity and vivid imagery express profound existential emptiness and momentary connection, rendering it ideal for psychological analysis.

Pound's portrayal of urban life reflects the complexities of the modern human condition—shaped by alienation, impermanence, and the strain of modernization. The poem raises essential questions about how imagery and metaphor intensify depictions of isolation and fleeting human connections within the urban environment. It also invites exploration of how these themes influence perceptions of human experience in a rapidly changing, industrialized world. Understanding the psychological consequences of urbanization is therefore vital for uncovering the deeper existential anxieties and fragmented sense of identity that define modern existence.

Significance of the Research

This research offers valuable insights into the modern human experience within the urban environment by analyzing Ezra Pound's *In a Station of the Metro* through Yalom's existential-psychological framework. It explores how alienation, transience, and the psychological effects of city life—such as loneliness, disconnection, and social anxiety—reflect the emotional and behavioral struggles of modern individuals. By linking modern literature with existential psychology, the study bridges two disciplines rarely examined together, illuminating the inner emptiness and search for meaning that characterize human life in the modern age. Ultimately, this research demonstrates how literature can reveal the psychological realities and existential concerns of individuals living under the pressures of modernization.

III. Literature Review

The early twentieth century witnessed rapid urban and industrial expansion that profoundly affected human psychology and social relationships. Modernist poets such as Pound, Eliot, and Williams responded to these transformations by portraying alienation, fragmentation, and disillusionment within city life. Pound's *In a Station of the Metro* captures fleeting human contact and depersonalized existence, mirroring the emotional isolation of individuals in a mechanized, urban environment.

Previous scholarship identifies *In a Station of the Metro* (1913) as one of the most representative Imagist poems, reflecting modernization through precise imagery (Abbah, 2021). With only fourteen carefully selected words, Pound captures a momentary perception of urban life. The poem's symbolic use of faces, petals, and the black bough conveys the impermanence of human connection. Similar to H.D.'s *Oread*, it employs concise, vivid imagery to evoke emotional resonance (Imagism, n.d.; Rénaux, n.d.).

According to Makhdum (2015), the poem embodies key traits of modernism, including urbanity, technological advancement, psychological depth, and existential reflection. Likewise, T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* explores similar feelings of alienation and disconnection, emphasizing the psychological distance characteristic of modern urban existence.

Pound's imagery mirrors the psychological withdrawal and transience typical of city life (Breitbart, 2017). The line "Petals on a wet, black bough" symbolizes the fragility of human relationships and the fleeting nature of beauty in contrast to the harshness of reality (Abbah, 2021; Makhdum, 2014).

Kenner (1971), Nadel (2004), and Perloff (1985) interpret Pound's Imagism as both an aesthetic and philosophical expression of modern existence, revealing the tension between beauty and impermanence. Levenson (2011) describes the poem as capturing the "momentary collision of perception and reality" that defines modern experience.

Within psychology, existential theorists such as May (1953), Tillich (1952), and Yalom (1980) have explored the human struggle with death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. Yalom's theory provides a psychological framework for understanding the alienation and transience represented in Pound's poem, where fleeting faces become symbols of existential loneliness amid modern chaos.

Although extensive research exists on Pound's Imagism and on existential psychology separately, little scholarship has examined their intersection. This study bridges that gap by integrating literary and psychological analysis to interpret how Pound's poem articulates the emotional and existential struggles of modern urban individuals. By connecting modern literature with Yalom's existential concerns, the research contributes to a more interdisciplinary understanding of human isolation, anxiety, and the enduring quest for meaning in a fragmented world.

Research Gap

Previous studies (e.g., Bashir et al., 2025; Abbas et al., 2025) have investigated urban alienation and psychological distance in metropolitan literature; however, they have rarely integrated **Imagist poetic technique** with **existential psychotherapy concepts**. Ezra Pound, through the Imagist compression technique in modernist urban poetry such as "*In a Station of the Metro*", uniquely captures this psychological and artistic synthesis. His work illustrates how individuals experience loneliness, solitude, ruptured relationships, anxiety about their social surroundings, difficulty in communicating with others, and trouble finding life's purpose or meaning of existence—conditions that can eventually culminate in psychological distress or suicidal ideation. This gap underscores the need for a study that bridges Imagist poetics with existential psychology to interpret how modernist imagery conveys deep psychological realities

IV. Research Methodology

In this research, **Yalom's theoretical framework of existential psychology** and his concept of the four ultimate concerns—death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness form the central foundation for connecting pivotal literary themes with the psychological dimensions underlying human existence. This framework provides a deeper and more individualized understanding of modern human experience, emphasizing desires, disconnections, loneliness, trauma, and decision-making processes that lead to existential crises.

It highlights the conscious struggle with existence—how individuals find meaning, confront mortality, deal with isolation, and embrace freedom—thus offering a rich basis for analyzing literary works centered on alienation, transience, and the search for meaning.

Correspondingly, the research methodology aims to create a coherent structure aligning Yalom's existential concepts with the literary analysis of Ezra Pound's *In a Station of the Metro*, ensuring theoretical consistency, academic credibility, and ethical responsibility. The study adopts **interpretative and thematic approaches** to explore how Yalom's four concerns are expressed through the poem's imagery, diction, style, and tone, making the methodology both rigorous and profoundly human-centered.

Poem Analysis

This research study is analyzed under the theoretical lens of Irvin D. Yalom's Existential Psychology and his four ultimate concerns—death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness to interpret Ezra Pound's imagery and human emotions within an existential framework. Yalom emphasizes conscious confrontation with existence,

showcasing how human how humans struggle with awareness of mortality, isolation, and the search for purpose of life (Yalom, 1980). The poem "*In a Station of the Metro*" by Ezra Pound deeply investigates the fleeting nature of human existence and the intense realization of individuality within a vast, impersonal world. The poem's concise imagery paints the picture of existential isolation and momentary awareness that human beings often experience living in urban areas.

Poem Lines:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

The poem's lines *the faces in the crowd* and *petals on a wet, black bough* symbolize the transitory and ephemerality of human life that how people appear briefly in the world's flow and then disappear into anonymity. The detailed analysis of the poem on the basis of Yalom's existential concerns is given below.

a. Existential Concern of Death

Yalom (1980) asserts that awareness of mortality lies at the center of human anxiety and creativity. The fading imagery of faces in the crowd reflects this awareness: human life, though vivid for a moment, inevitably fades. In daily life, people distract themselves from death through routine, ambition, or relationships, yet moments of stillness—like Pound's vision in the metro—suddenly restore awareness of transience and mortality.

This mirrors how modern society's rush conceals existential awareness until an unexpected encounter—a face, a silence, a memory—provokes reflection on the brevity of life. For example, people in urban areas may live alone and remain disconnected from close relationships. After facing serious incidents, they often realize life's shortness, prompting reflection on family and loved ones.

Such awareness of mortality is not necessarily depressing; rather, it can inspire authentic living. Conversely, avoidance of this awareness may intensify social and existential anxiety. This tension is visible in Pound's first line, "The apparition of these faces in the crowd", where the blurred faces signify disconnection and the lack of genuine interaction, evoking feelings of loss, hopelessness, and alienation.

b. Existential Concern of Isolation

According to Yalom, even though humans live within social worlds, existential isolation—an unbridgeable gap between one consciousness and another—remains unavoidable. In Pound's poem, the "faces" appear momentarily close yet remain emotionally distant. This parallels modern urban life, where individuals share physical space but lack meaningful connection—a condition familiar in today's technology-driven society.

Commuters engrossed in their phones in a crowded subway exemplify this silent isolation: together physically but worlds apart emotionally. In dense urban environments, individuals often become too busy for friends or family, withholding their emotions and experiences, which leads to anxiety and hopelessness. Feeling misunderstood and unseen, some may resort to destructive or self-harming actions, culminating in suicidal thoughts.

c. Existential Concern of Freedom

Yalom describes freedom as the realization that humans are the authors of their own choices and decisions, meaning no pre-given structure determine life's direction. However, this freedom can be anxiety-inducing, particularly within alienated urban life as portrayed in Pound's *In a Station of the Metro*.

The poem captures a moment of awareness that every person in the crowd possesses an isolated destiny shaped by their choices. This realization, while liberating, also generates existential dread. Practically, individuals who cannot share their thoughts or emotions often make decisions in solitude, later questioning and blaming themselves for their choices. Fear of change and the absence of supportive guidance entrap them further. Pound's poem subtly conveys this psychological entrapment and the tension between freedom and anxiety.

d. Existential Concern of Meaninglessness

Yalom states that, in an indifferent universe, humans must create meaning themselves. *In a Station of the Metro* captures a fleeting instant of beauty within the monotony of urban existence—a spark of meaning created by perception. The poet transforms an ordinary moment into profound insight, showing that meaning is not found but made.

In modern life, individuals may discover meaning through creativity, relationships, or appreciation of transient beauty—acts that, according to Yalom, counter existential emptiness. The line “*Petals on a wet, black bough*” embodies this concept: beauty amid darkness, life amid decay.

For instance, after retirement, a person may feel purposeless because their job once defined their identity. Over time, volunteering to teach children might restore a sense of fulfillment, demonstrating that meaning is self-constructed. Pound’s poem thus communicates a universal message: **meaning is not discovered but created by each individual** through conscious engagement with existence.

V. Conclusion

To encapsulate, this study of Ezra Pound’s imagist poem “*In a Station of the Metro*”, analyzed through Irvin D. Yalom’s existential psychology and his four ultimate concerns, reveals a profound conflict between human consciousness and the realities of existence. The poem’s concise yet vivid imagery—“*faces in the crowd*” and “*petals on a wet, black bough*”—encapsulates the fleeting nature of life and the inevitability of isolation, mirroring Yalom’s four existential themes: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness.

Each image resonates with the ephemeral human experience, showing that even moments of beauty are imbued with awareness of decay and impermanence. Themes of alienation and transience profoundly affect the human psyche, producing feelings of solitude, disconnection, social anxiety, and existential unease.

Ultimately, “*In a Station of the Metro*” transcends mere urban depiction to become a reflection on the human condition itself—the struggle for connection, the fear of existence, and the quest for meaning amid impermanence. Through this existential lens, Pound’s poem integrates Yalom’s ideas, illustrating how confronting life’s realities enriches authenticity and deepens understanding of being.

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